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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet describes 20 teaching ideas to incorporate poetry into the elementary school classroom. Topics included in this pamphlet are: (1) how to encourage a love of poetry; (2) how to introduce poetry to your class; (3) poetry and the senses; (4) poetry and the imagination; (5) poetry and the emotional experience; and (6) poetry and form. The pamphlet emphasizes that the poem should stand on its own merit and that these activities should not become gimmicky. The pamphlet argues that much will have been achieved if children come to see poetry as offering the most succinct language and the most intense message: a genre in which, in the words of a six-year-old, words "huddle together." (RS)

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WORDS THAT HUDDLE TOGETHER

by Beverley Croker

When I asked a number of young children 'What is poetry?' they responded:

> *'Poetry is always in lines. The pairs of lines have a relationship – sometimes rhyming and scanning.'* (Patrick aged 12)
> *'Poetry is good to read.'* (Catherine aged 6)
> *'I don't know what poetry is.'* (Hugh aged 6)
> *'Poems are just words that rhyme, words that huddle together.'* (Francisco aged 6).

These comments reflect the children's experiences of poetry, which is constituted by the types of poems each has encountered, together with each's own ability to fully comprehend the ideas presented by particular poems. I was concerned that all but one of the children's views indicate a very narrow view of what poetry is. Yet poetry reflects a great range of intellectual, emotional and sensory approaches to life. There is no reason why children should not be invited to share in these experiences.

In spite of all it has to offer, poetry seems to be the most neglected of genres in the language programme in elementary schools. Why is this so? It may in part be due to teachers' own memories of negative experiences with poetry. It may also be that we, as teachers, are somewhat unsure how poetry can best be used to develop a child's language and literary skills.

I once observed a class of sixth grade boys, ninety per cent of whom were from non-English speaking backgrounds, being taught Alfred Lord Tennyson's *The Beggar Maid*. The boys were read the poem, then told to learn the first stanza by heart, after which they were to find the figures of speech in the poem and lastly to write an essay 'telling what the poem was about and why they liked it'. This lesson was a total recipe for disaster. It revealed some of the key DON'TS in teaching poetry.

- **Poor choice of poem.** Whilst few would question the literary merits of Tennyson's poem, it was inappropriate for those particular students whose backgrounds game them no knowledge of such content and who were struggling with the English language. It is vital to choose subjects with which students can identify intellectually and emotionally, and language which they can understand and find meaningful.
- **Drilling and memorizing.** Committing poems to memory can be satisfying and enjoyable but there was no choice as to which lines the boys memorised and there was no reason for such learning.
- **Analyzing.** A line by line dissection of a poem can be a rewarding experience if approached correctly at an advanced level of literary appreciation. However, for this inexperienced class of poetry readers, it was a destructive task.
- **Paraphrasing.** To ask what the poem was about was counter-productive. Poetry conveys a message in precise images but since these images often work on multiple levels it is not susceptible to literal analysis.

HOW TO ENCOURAGE A LOVE OF POETRY

Poetry opens many doors to learning.

- It stimulates the senses;
- it challenges the imagination;
- it shares emotional experiences; and
- it sharpens an awareness of the diversity of literary forms.

Poetry is not for teaching but for sharing. It is not something for a thirty minute session once a week but an integral part of the whole language programme. It *can* be included across the curriculum in Social Studies, History, Science and Mathematics. A unit on the Japanese provides a wonderful opportunity to introduce some translated Japanese verse as well as showing children the form of haiku. A study of North American Indians would not be

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complete without reading some of Chief Dan George's poems from *My Heart Soars*. The great diversity in poetry offers unlimited possibilities for involvement. Give children a range of poems from different countries, different eras and written for different purposes. Share some humorous poems with your class during five minute breaks. Try a rousing traditional ballad or other narrative poem.

HOW TO INTRODUCE POETRY TO YOUR CLASS

The following method is a simple yet effective way to introduce poems and poetry into the classroom arena.

1. Browse. Read many, many poems yourself. Choose poems for both adults and children, from recent and older anthologies (ref. Bibliography). Discover what *you* like in poetry.
2. Introduce your class to a poem you have really enjoyed. Simply share the humour or the pathos or the rollicking rhythm of the narrative. This may involve nothing more than a reading of the poem.
3. Continue to share with your class poems that you have found enjoyable. Encourage the children to select poems to share too. This will allow you to have an insight into your class's interests and growing understanding of poetry.
4. Display anthologies of poems, copies of favourite poems, poems the children have written, in a reading corner. Opportunities for small group and individual readings should be readily available to the children.
5. Now you and your class are ready to explore Poetry together.

IDEAS FOR SHARING POETRY

There are many ways of exploring poetry. These include sharing the poet's appeal to the senses, the poet's ability to offer imaginative insights, his/her sensitive recording of emotional experiences and the skill shown in experimenting with poetic form.

Poetry and the senses

From infant days children are introduced to rhythmic patterns of language – in lullabies, nursery rhymes and clapping rhymes. Very few babies have not been dandled on loving grandparents' or parents' knees and had their toes identified while the adult recited

This little pig went to market
This little pig stayed at home...

In later years as the children joined in games they would learn

Jelly on a plate, jelly on a plate,
Wibble, wobble, wibble, wobble, jelly on a plate

while they grew red in the face, skipping.

By the time children enter school they have learned, however unconsciously, that repetition can help them anticipate and remember words, that thyme makes it easier to remember the next line, that rhythm offers a patterning for their activities (for example in skipping games) and above all that through alliteration words can work to give meaning. What child does not delight in saying 'wibble-wobble'?

From an early awareness of the music of poetry, children can move on to a more sophisticated appreciation of language.

TEACHING IDEAS

1. Children coming to school with a knowledge of sounds are well prepared to explore language. They enjoy the musical qualities of language. Bill Martin Jnr has built his early reading programme on the basis that children can learn to read rapidly and confidently if they are sensitive to rhyme, rhythm, phrase-sentence and story patterns. A beginning reader faced with *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* draws on knowledge of repetition, rhyme and definitely rhythm to be able to what Bill Martin Jnr calls 'break the code'.

Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?
I see a red bird looking at me

Once children have mastered the pattern, they can innovate to extend their awareness of the musical qualities that are needed, for example writing or saying

Black cat, black cat, what do you hear?

2. Aside from building confidence in reading, the musical qualities can form the direct cue to interpreting meaning. One must be conscious of pitch, volume, onomatopæic qualities and pace if one is to convey the full meaning of a poem such as *The Onomatopæic River* by Max Dunn. Other strong poems in this category are Peter McFarlane's *Automatic Wash Cycle (And Other Noises)* and *A Swamp Romp* by Doug MacLeod.

3. Jack Prelutsky truly understands that the musical qualities of his *Nightmares: Poems to Trouble Your Sleep* create a wonderful visual impact. Through rhyme (end rhyme and internal rhyme) and alliteration, Prelutsky gives us ghastly pictures such as his description of *The Witch*[1].

a dangling nose, ten twisted toes
and folds of shriveled skin,
cracked and chipped and crackled lips
that frame a toothless grin

The dust jacket of *Nightmares* announced that the book is 'for all those who revel in words well worked'. Surely *dangling* and *crackled* are words well worked, creating more than a visual image. They appeal to one's sense of the sounds of language. Children will enjoy the tongue's response to *ten twisted toes* and may speculate why *crooked* is not as effective a choice of word as *twisted* in this line.

4. Musical qualities can be used superbly to create a succinct message. Ogden Nash, Hilaire Belloc and more recently Spike Milligan, Allan Ahlberg and Michael Rosen to name but a few have used crisp short poems to convey a message. One cannot help but admire Ogden Nash's precision in *Algy met a bear.*

Limericks also come into this category. They have long had a universal appeal where rhyme and rhythm are used to convey an often caustic comment.

5. It is very easy to teach children about rhyme. In fact, it is difficult to draw them away from it in their own poetry writing! Rhythm is more difficult and comes to be understood more slowly.

- Simple clapping and stamping in sympathy with the words of a poem is an obvious starting point.
- The examination of the lyrics of a song can be valuable, matching the word patterns to the musical patterns.
- The musical accompaniment (especially with percussion instruments for poems such as *The Highwayman* by Alfred Noyes) can heighten children's awareness of rhythm.
- At a more advanced level, children can be given a prose passage and then shown how, through the precise selection and ordering of the language and the development of a strong rhythmic pattern, a poem may evolve. For example: From a prose form such as the following

  'I took a photograph of a zebra. Strange, although I took it in colour, it turned out black and white.'

  a poem may emerge

  The Zebra's Photo[2]

  I snapped it in colour!
  ...This photo's not right!
  Just look at this zebra!
  ...It's in black and white.

  Chris Hogan

Once children have grasped the notion, you can move on to more complex patterns.

6. Choral work, involving class recitation of a poem, can be either of great value or a disastrous bore. If you choose poems for their (a) musical qualities and/or (b) their dramatic qualities you can achieve some imaginative responses. Some examples which work well are:

Cat! by Eleanor Farjeon; *Jabberwocky* by Lewis Carroll; *Daniel* by Vachel Lindsay; *My Dad, Your Dad* by Kit Wright; *The Owl and the Pussycat* by Edward Lear.

7. An excellent poem to show children how meaning can work through rhythm and melody is *The King's Breakfast* by A.A. Milne. The rhythmic pattern is basically short-short-long, which encourages the reader to adopt the correct tone that reflects the emotional responses of the characters (e.g. embarrassed, agitated, sobbing).

8. A delightful collection of poems that work orally is to be found in *Take a Chance* compiled by Rory Harris and written by secondary school students. What wonderful expression can be given to the following poem!

Watch Out Fellows[3]

Here comes the milk
FLUG GLUG
HELP HELP I'm drowning
Aah Thanks mate
Saved by the spoon
Hey! who turned out the lights
Chomp Chomp
WATCH IT MATE.
You nearly chopped me in half
Aah! I'm falling, falling.
Thud! Where am I
Hey, Get your hands off me
How does a cornflake get out of here?
Get off me I said
I'm suffocating, help me

HELPP.....

Erica Sharplin

Poetry and the imagination

Children naturally have wonderful imaginations. Your task is merely to sharpen their awareness. Poetry can open new worlds.

TEACHING IDEAS

1. Poetry can take children back through history to times of steam trains and steamrollers (for example, *The Night Ride* by Kenneth Slessor and *Steamroller* by William Hart-Smith).

2. Poetry can show children environments different from their own (for example, *Bush* by James Lister Cuthbertson which stands in contrast to *The Suburbs* by Enid Denham).

3. Poetry can allow the reader to perceive life from a different perspective, for example Ian Mudie's *Snake* allows us to see the snake's view of man.

Hey, I just met a man, a monster, too;
Must have been, oh, seven feet tall

4. Poetry can allow the reader to make comparisons, to see similarities and differences in the world about him. If, for instance, one takes a theme such as CATS and examines a number of poems one finds that some poems such as *The Tomcat* by Don Marquis and *The Prize Cat* by E.J. Pratt suggest that under the guise of domesticity there lurks a fierce untamed creature whilst in contrast *Phil, The Black Persian* by Herbert Palmer, is a poem about a spoilt black persian to whom the owner is a slave.

5. Imaginative comparisons can be created by metaphors and similes. Children can enjoy identifying the use of metaphor in poems such as William Jay Smith's *The Toaster*, Charles Malam's *Steam Shovel* or Judith Wright's *Magpies*.

The Toaster[4]

A silver-scaled dragon with jaws flaming red
Sits at my elbow and toasts my bread.
I hand him fat slices, and then, one by one,
He hands them back when he sees they are done.

William Jay Smith

Can one ever again see a toaster as a mundane electrical appliance?

Similes also offer rich levels of meaning as the reader compares the characteristics of the two objects identified. Are the similarities in the following image of flying foxes appropriate?

Flying Foxes[5]

They drift down the dusk
Like sticks on a river

Lydia Pender

From this point, children can be encouraged to write their own comparisons. I suggest such activities be taken in steps, such as those outlined below.

STEP 1. Write a simple simile given the object (e.g. 'baby white mice').

STEP 2. Select an appropriate animal that one could compare with, say, one of the natural elements (fire, air, water, earth).

STEP 3. Given a simile make it into a metaphor.

STEP 4. Sustain an image throughout an entire poem. Use a model such as *The Sea* by James Reeves to guide the children.

STEP 5. Compare the impact where the same object is perceived in different images. For example, Thomas Ernest Hulme in *Above the Dock* sees the moon as a 'child's balloon, forgotten after play' whilst in a poem called *Autumn* he sees the moon in a different way as a 'red-faced farmer' leaning over a hedge.

STEP 6. Explore the use of personification. Before children begin to write their own poetry they should have experiences of lots of poems involving the giving of human traits to non-human subjects. *Gus: The Theatre Cat* and *Macavity: The Mystery Cat* both by T.S. Eliot are two excellent examples.

There are, however, two traps for the unwary:

- Expecting that *all* children will perceive the image in the same way – a great deal depends on their past experiences as to how effective the image is for them.
- Accepting superficial responses to questions on how an image makes the child feel.

6. Imagination can also be effectively stimulated through providing a poem that offers a riddle. This may be done at a variety of levels:

- by omitting the title of the poem so the children have to identify the object of the poem
- by revealing one line at a time
- (for a more advanced level) by mixing the order of the original lines of a poem so that, in order to discover the nature of the object being described, one needs to reorder the lines, visualize through the clues given and interpret the images.

Such activity allows the children to discuss the patterns of the lines, possible rhyme schemes, rhythmic pattern as well as visualising the literal object through clues. As children become proficient at reordering the lines of a poem, you can make the examples more difficult by mixing all the lines, or choosing poems without any rhyme scheme. Such activities provide excellent experiences in higher order thinking.

7. One can use a poetry cloze to stimulate an imaginative response as the reader first of all has to have a clear image of what is described and then has to search for appropriate words to fill the spaces. It can generate discussion about choice of language. One can use oral and written cloze in a group situation or with individuals. There is no correct or incorrect answer and the environment must be totally non-threatening. It is best to begin with simple, predictable patterns. As with all cloze passages the number of words and part of speech omitted will affect the level of difficulty. It is wise to leave the first stanza complete. Such an activity requires the complete reading of the poem to establish the form (rhyme, rhythm, etc.) and the content.

Poetry and emotional experience

Poetry, of course, stimulates a great range of emotional responses as poets attempt to share experiences and create particular moods in their work. Poetry puts us in touch with our own emotions. It is important that we recognise and deal with these emotions. Poetry provides an objective way of doing this.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

1 Some emotional experiences can be shared in a large group. The humour of domestic, everyday occurrences is captured in collections of poems by Colin Thiele in *Songs for my Thongs,* and Michael Rosen's *Wouldn't You Like To Know* and of school life by Allan Ahlberg in *Please Mrs Butler.* Such poems are meant to be enjoyed with others as we discover our humanness in our relationships, our response to school our dislikes and likes, our fears and joys.

2. By contrast, some poems are of an intensely personal nature and should be shared only with a small group or simply read by oneself. It is important that children become aware of this fact. The power of poetry is that it allows one to respond uniquely.

Poetry and form

During their reading of poetry children incidentally notice that poetry has many forms, some poems showing strict patternings of lines, rhyme and rhythm, other poems adopting a variety of creative forms. As they come to try to write poetry for themselves, children sometimes find a valuable stimulus in a form poem. Children are able to write using their knowledge of musical qualities, imagination and emotional experiences in a controlled way in such forms as Dylan Thomas Portraits, Ezra Pound Couplets, Syllable Poems, Haiku, Cinquains, Limericks, etc. Whether children prefer such ordered forms or other verse forms, it is most important that they have a wide experience of poetry to explore prior to their writing so that they might truly understand the nature of poetry and the task they are undertaking.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

1. Children may enjoy creating a visually directed poem. In *Take A Chance* compiled by Rory Harris there is a section prefaced by the statement 'A poem should be laid out on the page the way the poet wants it read'. The students have obviously enjoyed writing their responses as the next example shows

Poems[6]

PO
POEM
POETRY
POETICAL
UNPOETICAL
FUNNY POEM
SAD POEM
POEM
EM

Baden Ashton

2. Bill Martin Jnr has explored how a concrete poem can create a visual impression of its content. Thus the visual and aural impact of the poem can be combined. Let children develop a pattern for such poems as *Clowns* by Margaret Mahy, *Duck's Ditty* by Kenneth Grahame, *Long Dog* by Irene McLeod, *Upside Down* by Aileen Fisher. A group of children I taught had fun with Colin Thiele's *If I Were A Frog.*

3 Children enjoy discussing how a poem may most effectively be visually presented using an appropriate print, colours, illustrations, etc. A poem like *Mice* by Rose Fyleman can produce some creative results including the word MICE written many times as a background to the poem, or the words can be set in the shape of a mouse, or as a series of illustrations to replace key words creating a rhebus.

example: *Their* *are long*
Their *are small*

Other poems which lend themselves to rhebus cloze are *Cats* by Eleanor Farjeon, *The Owl and the Pussycat* by Edward Lear and *Weather* by Eve Merriam. These can provide a wonderful puzzle.

CONCLUSION

We can all enjoy poetry. With just a little sensitivity we can give poetry a place in our classroom. If we ignore it we do children a disservice. Poetry must occur spontaneously in the classroom and the activities that accompany any poem must be relevant and meaningful. However, at no time should the activities be gimmicky so that the poem becomes secondary to the activities. The poem must stand on its own merit.

We, as teachers, will have achieved a great deal if we can bring our children to see poetry as six year old Francisco already sees it – as 'words that huddle together'. Francisco has discovered that, of all literary genres, poetry offers the most succinct language and the most intense messages.

Sources of Poems in this Paper

POET	POEM	ANTHOLOGY
Ashton, Baden	Poems	*Take a Chance*
Campbell, David	Snail	*Rattling in the Wind*
Carroll, Lewis	Jabberwocky	*I Like This Poem*
Cuthbertson, James Lister	The Bush	*Taking the Sun*
Dahl, Roald	The Toad and the Snail	*Dirty Beasts*
Denham, Enid	The Suburbs	*Taking the Sun*
Dunn, Max	The Onomatopæia River	*Taking the Sun*
Eliot, T.S.	Macavity: The Mystery Cat	*Once Upon a Rhyme*
Farjeon, Eleanor	Cats	*Once Upon a Rhyme*
Fisher, Aileen	Upside Down	*I Like This Poem*
Fyleman, Rose	Mice	*When A Goose Meets a Moose*
Grahame, Kenneth	Duck's Ditty	*The Young Puffin Book of Verse*
Hart-Smith, William	Steamroller	*Taking the Sun*
Hogan, Chris	The Zebra's Photo	*Someone is Flying Balloons*
Hulme, Thomas Ernest	Above the Dock	*Poetry Workshop*
Hulme, Thomas Ernest	Autumn	*Poetry Workshop*
Leon, Edward	The Owl and the Pussycat	*The Young Puffin Book of Verse*
Lindsay, Vachel	Daniel	*Voices*
MacLeod, Doug	A Swamp Romp	*Someone is Flying Balloons*
Mahy, Margaret	Clowns	*I Like This Poem*
Marquis, Don	The Tomcat	*Poetry Workshop*
McFarlane, Peter	Automatic Washing Cycle	*Someone is Flying Balloons*
McLeod, Irene	Lone Dog	*I Like This Poem*
Merriam, Eve	Weather	*I Like This Poem*
Milligan, Spike	A Baby Sardine	*A Second Poetry Book*
Milne, A.A.	The King's Breakfast	*When We Were Very Young*
Mudie, Ian	Snake	*Taking the Sun*
Noyes, Alfred	The Highwayman	*I Like This Poem*
Palmer, Herbert	Phil, The Black Persian	*Poetry Workshop*
Pender, Lydia	Flying Foxes	*Someone is Flying Balloons*
Pratt, E.J.	The Prize Cat	*Poetry Workshop*
Prelutsky, Jack	The Witch	*Nightmares: Poems to Trouble Your Sleep*
Sandburg, Carl	Fog	*When A Goose Meets a Moose*
Sharplin, Erica	Watch Out Fellows	*Take A Chance*
Slessor, Kenneth	The Night Ride	*Taking the Sun*
Smith, William Jay	The Toaster	*A Second Poetry Book*
Tennyson, Alfred Lord	The Beggfar Maid	*British and Australian Poems*
Thiele, Colin	If I Were A Frog	*Songs for my Thongs*
Wright, Judith	Magpies	*Taking the Sun*
Wright, Kit	My Dad, Your Dad	*A Second Poetry Book*

The views expressed in this pamphlet are the views of the author. They do not necessarily represent the view of the editor or the Australian Reading Association.

The success of the Reading Around Series depends on the willingness of people to contribute. If you have ideas for classroom practice which you would like to share with a wider audience we would like to hear from you. A small fee is paid for published manuscripts. Contributions and enquiries should be sent to Dr Fred Gollasch, PO Box 588, WAGGA WAGGA, NSW, 2650.

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About the author...

Bev Croker is a lecturer in the Centre for Language Arts Education at Armidale College of Advanced Education. She has taught extensively in both primary and secondary schools. For the last twelve years Bev has worked in teacher training institutions, lecturing in language methods and children's literature. For many years Bev has advocated the value of using literature to develop language skills. Whilst, in the last few years, there *has* been a move to making children's literature central to language programmes in the elementary school, Bev believes that the value of poetry is still not fully recognised.